

History of the ABS and Bonsai in America

Part 1: 1800's through 1967

By Doug Hawley

Figure 1: Above left, samurai with pine c. 1870.

Figure 2: Above right, pruning a pine c. late 19th century.

Figure 3: Below left, very early photo - girl and Ume (apricot) c. 1870.

Figure 4: Below right, pruning the potted pine tree, by Banreki; it is unknown who or what Banreki is in this likely 16 century work which appeared on the cover of Bonsai Journal Vol 2 #3, 1968.



In honor of the 50th anniversary of the American Bonsai Society, we present a four-part series on the history and development of bonsai in North America, and the history of ABS. We will pay special attention to how ABS affected and was affected by the evolution of American bonsai philosophy and sophistication. Although the period of late nineteenth century through 1967 encompasses many more years than the subsequent chapters, it includes the least bonsai activity. In fact, most of the bonsai activity in America took place in the final decade of this period, when interest in bonsai literally went viral!

However in order to have a clear understanding of the evolution of bonsai in America, it helps to have some knowledge of the history of bonsai in the rest of the world, especially Japan. Most of us have read about the ancient history of bonsai; how bonsai was imported to Japan from China perhaps around 1100 A.D., then gradually refined over the centuries. The emergence of Zen Buddhism, also from China around the same time, was said to have been an important influence.

Regardless, a tree-in-a-pot became well accepted in early Japanese culture, probably in the context of representing harmony and oneness with nature; and the beauty of simplicity, with a single tree representing nature and the universe. Hachi-no-ki is a famous Japanese play about a man who burned his three best bonsai to keep strangers warm; this was written around 1400, the end of the Kamakura era. The Muromachi era followed, and bonsai tended to become gradually more of a pastime of the upper classes. Through much the following

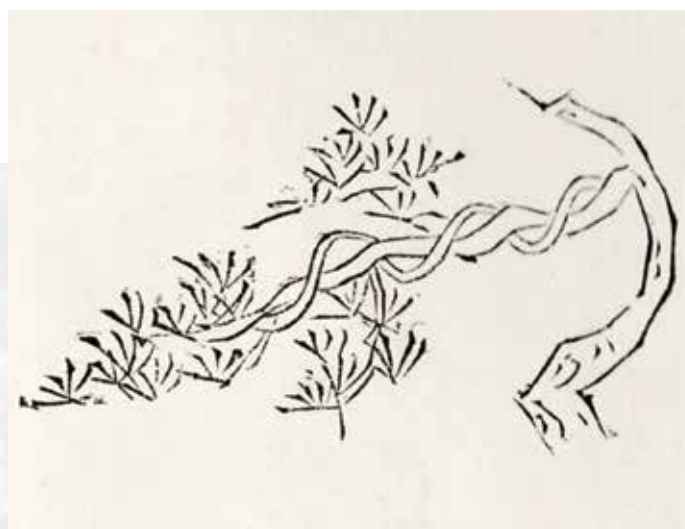
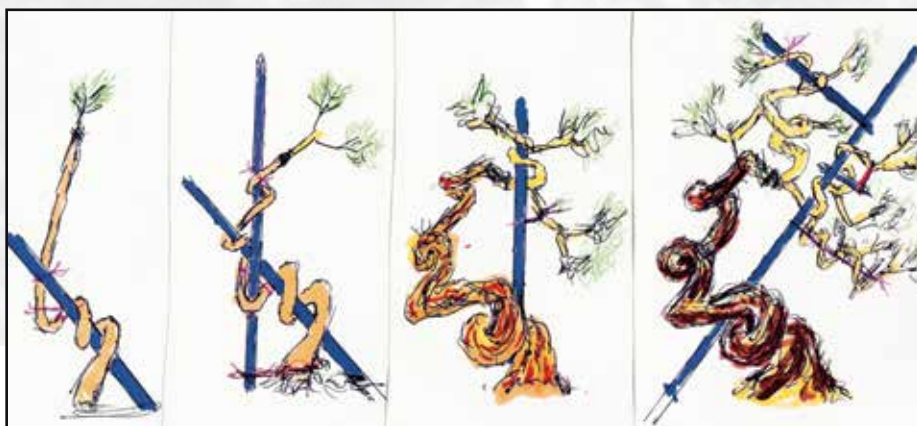


Figure 5: Above left, probable cypress, Taki or "octopus style" c. 1888.

Figure 6: Above middle, Japanese red pine with greatly exposed roots and Horai style branching; c. 1890.

Figure 7: Above right, technique of wiring, shown in early bonsai book initially c. 1903.

Figure 8: Below left, sequence, left to right, of consecutive yearly bending and curving Japanese white pine grafts in-ground, eventually forming Horai style. Drawings by author.



Tokugawa era (1603-1867) Japan was isolated from the rest of the world. But bonsai began to increase in popularity during the last 50-100 years of this period. Woodblock prints and very early photographs typically show bonsai before 1850 as either Japanese white pine, flowering apricot, or flowering cherry; occasionally orange trees (Figures 1 through 4). These are usually in deep decorative pots.

Bonsai also developed as a commercial product around 1800, with nurseries in Tokyo, Honai, Kyoto and Takamatsu (Kinashi Bonsai Village) growing fields of grafted Japanese White Pine. Styling was still minimal, but some pines were styled in the Tako (or Tako-tsukuri) ("octopus") style (Figure 5). The Horai style, taking the twisting and curving to extreme, was developed during this period. There is controversy as to whether this was used mainly for export (with the Japanese reserving the more artful trees for themselves); or whether it was a popular style for everyone. Regardless, by the early to mid-1800's, nurseries are alleged to have almost mass-produced these grafted white pines, developed as per Figure 8. Exposed root styles (Figure 6) also were common.

Beginning in the Meiji era, 1867, bonsai popularity and acceptance across all classes exploded. The unnatural

grotesquely twisted trees in the Tokugawa era soon gave way to the evolution of highly developed stylistic and horticultural techniques (although Taka and Horai mass produced white pines were still developed for export until World War II). Styling was more natural, and by 1900 many more species were used. But a few years later, as copper wire use was developed (Figure 7), stricter detail and rules for different styles increased. Improvement in refinement and detail continued through the 20th century and even today. The continuing evolution of detail and style is amazing. Bonsai from the period 1888 through 1929 are shown in Figures 9 through 16.

Shinobu Nozaki (Figure 17), was a Japanese bonsai master in the early 20th century, author of several books (including the first in English) and editor of *Nogyo Sekai*. He had studied the changes in trees in vogue for bonsai over the previous century, and noted these trends:

- 1829-1853: goyo-matsu/silver-leaved Japanese white pine (JWP); apricot, crabapple, cherry, orange.
- 1854-67: same, add camellia.
- 1868-1897: add Japanese red pine, Japanese black pine (JBP), horned orange, rose.



Figure 9: Above, a worker for Yokahama Nursery prunes massive bonsai in 1910, likely a juniper or cypress.



Figure 10: Middle, a Frenchman enjoys a bonsai, 1900.



Figure 11: Below, Hinoki Cypress, c 1902.

- 1898-1913: add cryptomeria, hinoki cypress, needle juniper, shimpaku juniper, procumbans juniper, Japanese fir, mulberry, peony, zelkova, elm, pomegranate, and maple. However the favorites in this period were zelkova and JBP.
- 1914-1939: add Nishiki (cork-bark) JBP and hon-goyomatsu (a denser greener JWP), ezo spruce, wisteria, holly, and satsuki azalea. Favorites in this period were the

improved JWP, cork-bark JBP, JBP, Ezo or yezo spruce, shimpaku, apricot and satsuki azalea.

This period also saw the rise and fall of the yamadori., or ancient trees collected from the wild. The best specimens came from dangerous cliffs and mountains of northern Japan and Hokkaido, where limited soil and rugged conditions created stunted twisted specimens of great beauty. Shimpaku were the most in-demand; full-time shimpaku hunters emerged (Figure 18), risking their lives to collect shimpaku from the mountainside. A prototype example of the twisted gnarled beauty of these early collected shimpaku would be Fudo, an itoigawa shimpaku juniper collected in 1910 by Tahei Sazuki, who initially discovered this variety on Mt. Myouji. This was shown at an early pre-Kokufo-ten exhibition in 1929, shown in Figure 19 a picture not known by this author to have been published before this article. It won first prize, then disappeared, being called the phantom juniper until an appearance in the 11th Kokufo-ten and from a Life article visit to Keibun Tanaka's Tokyo nursey (Figure 20). Those pictures are the "early Fudo" pictures generally published. In the late 1960's, Kyuzo Murata was finally able to obtain the tree. Early members of the ABS and the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens (BBG) saw the tree at Murata-san's gardens (Figure 21) and were able to purchase the historical masterpiece from Murata-san; he was reluctant but anxious to promote bonsai to the USA. Unfortunately, Fudo died within the first year; but analysis of this allowed changes to the way Japan's donation of bonsai to the National Arboretum were handled, probably helping to prevent the death of many of these historic masterpieces. Shimpaku collecting in Japan peaked in the early 20th century, but the mountains became rapidly depleted of good, and eventually any, shimpaku. This led to dramatically increased prices, and increasingly dangerous climbs by shimpaku hunters. By the end of the twentieth century, despite the organization of a union for rules and safety, the last shimpaku hunters retired or died in falls, with no significant wild shimpaku remaining. Fudo's skeleton remains on display at the BBG today.

Bonsai development continued in Japan through the 1930's, with a brief setback from the 1923 Great Kanto earthquake (which devastated Tokyo with its associated fire, flooding, tsunami and typhoon; but eventually led to geographical expansion of concentrated bonsai regions). By the late 1920's, more books, several bonsai magazines, and

regular exhibitions took place. Kokufu ten, the premier exhibition, started in 1934. By the late 1930's, bonsai could be found in almost all department stores, and were almost standard household items. The common bonsai satisfied both the Zen Buddhist appreciation of simplicity and oneness with nature as well as the practicality of small size in this geographically dense crowded population. Almost opposed to this, the intellectuals and bonsai elite appreciated the artistic beauty and complex yet rule-oriented creation of the highest level bonsai, some of which had value comparable to a house or car.

So by the pre-WWII 20th century, bonsai in Japan had become strikingly beautiful, but difficult for outsiders: it required years of training to develop the proper "eye" for design and the horticultural species-specific knowledge to support it. This was promoted further by a culture of technique secrecy, and a philosophy of "keeping it in the family" or teaching by apprenticeship. Even so, the family member or apprentice was often not directly taught, but rather was expected to spend 80 hours per week watching and performing menial tasks such as pulling weeds; gradually they would be assigned more skilled tasks. They learned by osmosis, not by being taught. In fact this is quite consistent with the Zen Buddhist philosophy of valuing experience over knowledge. Regardless, it is no surprise that there were very few bonsai experts outside of Japan (and China). So as we will see below, the many opportunities westerners had to view and purchase bonsai never evolved into any sustained bonsai communities in America. The possible exception would be a

few clusters of Japanese Americans on the west coast, but these few clusters were interrupted by internment during WWII. Many magazine articles in the early 20th century noted that it would be unlikely that Americans would ever acquire the knowledge or patience to practice bonsai.

This bonsai milieu began to change in Japan around the late 1940's to early 1950's, the same time interest in America was about to explode. Whether this had anything to do with Japan being occupied by US troops after the war or not is unclear; but this certainly at least exposed tens of thousands of young Americans to Japanese bonsai. Perhaps it was simply a new generation of bonsai masters piecing things together after the war. Regardless, it seems striking that the Japanese masters became much more open to sharing and spreading knowledge.

Bonsai also became quite attractive to Western hobbyists: a bonsai was a beautiful and valuable artistic product for which extensive knowledge could be acquired, yet perfection and complete knowledge could never quite be reached. The more you learned, the more there was to still learn. Plus, there was a new fad of admiration of oriental exotica. On the west coast, Japanese Americans, many of them just released from internment after WWII got together to learn and promote bonsai. Independently, bonsai enthusiasts on the east coast took advantage of the new culture of open knowledge from Japanese masters.

It was the perfect storm: bonsai boomed in the USA. On the west coast, the California Bonsai Association evolved in southern California. In



Figure 12: Above, pine bonsai, 1902.



Figure 13: Below, *Prunus ume* (apricot) 1900.

northern California this was followed by five clubs banding together, eventually forming Bonsai Clubs International (BCI) in the San Francisco Bay area. And in New York, 13 people formed Bonsai Society of Greater New York, and started a journal; within 3 years, membership from across the country exploded; obviously, a national organization was needed: hence, ABS. All of



Figure 14: Above, trident maple, 1900.

Figure 15: Middle, another trident, 1911.

Figure 16: Below, collected shimpaku juniper 1928



this happened between the early 1950's to 1968.

So let's back up a bit, in fact about a century. Bonsai were virtually unknown in America. A few travelers and traders reported on the strange and contorted little Japanese trees. The more detailed articles described how the oriental bonsai experts tortured and starved the trees, giving as little soil, water and fertilizer as possible yet still keeping them alive (of course, we know today that almost the opposite is true: we water and fertilize generously so that we can increase ramification, leaf reduction and back budding by specific and extensive timed pruning!). As globalization progressed, bonsai displays and sales took place across the world in the form of international expositions. This included the 1876 Philadelphia Centennial Exposition; the 1893 Chicago World's Columbian Exposition; expositions in Atlanta (1895), Buffalo (1901); St. Louis (1904); and Portland (1905). Probably the biggest was the 1915 San Francisco Panama-Pacific International Exposition, when the Japanese government put together a large group of high quality bonsai, which was seen by 19,000,000 people.

Bonsai became somewhat popular in Europe around 1900. Subaru Eida of London established a nursery and a large collection of mostly Japanese imports; he put on several shows in England between 1900 and 1910; the Princess of Wales (later Queen Alexandra) became interested. In France, the

first western language book, *Les Arbres Nains Japonais*, by Albert Maumene, was published in 1902 (Figures 11 and 12 are from this book). And a German, Alfred Koehn, spent extensive time in Japan starting in the 1920's, collecting knowledge. He also wrote a book about potted landscapes in the 30's and about bonsai in the 50's.

During these early times in the USA, there were scattered individuals who were notable for having bonsai. For the most part, the bonsai were imported from Japan. By the way, if you notice that I've almost totally dropped the important development of bonsai or pun-sai in China, you can thank the nationalistic politicians of the late 19th century USA, who passed the 1882 Chinese Exclusion Act. This severely limited Chinese immigrants and imports, and thus reduced the early influence of China on USA bonsai. The appreciation of the Chinese form of the art started with the 1969 and 1974 Man Lung Garden Artistic Pot Plants volumes, and subsequently was rejuvenated by BCI reaching out to China, well after the period covered by this article.

As we begin to name some of the early pre-1945 bonsai pioneers, your author apologizes in advance for missing many important bonsai people, and for probably botching some of the stories. Limited (and sometimes contradictory or obviously embellished) accounts are all we have available in the written literature from and about this period of bonsai history. Nevertheless, here are some important American bonsai people from before WWII:

- The **Domoto family** opened the Domoto Brothers Nursery in Oakland in 1883, (Figure 22) the first USA Nursery to include bonsai. Kanetero Domoto was the primary bonsai enthusiast, and his son Toichi opened his own primar-

ily bonsai nursery around 1930 when the initial one went bankrupt. A trident maple bonsai purchased by Kanetero in 1913; it was donated to the Pacific Rim collection in 1990 by Toichi.

- **Larz Anderson** was a Cincinnati native who had visited Japan in 1888 and returned with two Japanese maple bonsai. But this hobby was put on hold as he became a US Ambassador, eventually to Japan. Upon retirement in 1913, he imported not only a large and ancient bonsai collection (including trees reputed to be several hundred years old), but two Japanese gardeners to his Massachusetts home to care for them. One of the bonsai was from the Imperial collection of the Tokugawa era. After his death, his collection went to the Arnold Arboretum in 1938; many of these remain there today.
- **Ernest Coe** of New York had an extensive collection, and donated 32 of these, all Japanese imports, to the Brooklyn Botanical Garden in 1917.
- **Makoto Hagiwara** of San Francisco started importing bonsai to help his contracted Japanese Tea Garden, but then became interested enough that he kept up bonsai until his death in 1925.
- **Bunkio Matsuki** was a nurseryman purely as a businessman, but was commissioned by the Brooklyn Botanical Gardens to write *Japanese Potted Trees* in 1931.
- **Ryozo Nomura** was a pioneer in grafting bonsai in LA before the war; He spent his first 19 years in Japan, and actually worked on bonsai extensively from age ten. Using techniques he learned in Japan, he introduced complex grafting to the USA. He brought Japanese white pine to the west coast by grafting from a tree planted before import restrictions. He went on to become highly influential in promoting grafting as part of routine bonsai development. He did important work with pines, glauca, and juniper.
- **Tameichi "Sam" Doi**, of Los Angeles CA, taught bonsai before the war. He also had other accomplishments; for example, he brought the first cork-bark Japanese black pine to the USA, cuttings from which many of the corkbarks in California were derived, even up to today. Corkbarks pictured in exhibition books by Frank Nagata and Richard Ota in the 1970's were grafted from Doi-san (note that one source claims Nagata-san actually smuggled the first corkbark). He later played an important role in USA bonsai history with John Naka, but returned to Japan around 1949.
- **Lee Hodakowski** in the San Fernando Valley, CA, started bonsai in 1913. By 1943 he had 1000 bonsai, and conducted classes and gave lectures throughout the west



Figure 17: Above, Shinobu Nozaki on right, standing next to nursery owner, Tokyo, c. 1938.



Figure 18: Left, a professional shimpaku hunter, Their tool of the trade was a pick, used both for climbing and to dig the tree and cut roots.

coast. He had trained with Japanese masters, including techniques for collecting from the wild. Astoundingly, he traveled around the world to extraordinarily dangerous places to collect bonsai from the wild. One account described how he gradually cut roots of an ancient mountain Sierra pine over 4 years, then used dynamite to free it from its crevice; then he allowed several years to move it down the mountain, limiting its decent to 1000 ft per year; it survived.

- **Ken Sugimoto** founded the West Los Angeles Bonsai Club in 1939; after the war, he founded the Peninsula Bonsai Club in Palo Alto, then the San Francisco Bonsai Club.
- **Fred Lape** in New York started bonsai in 1940; he was self-taught. He was probably the first to collect native American plants on the east coast, including larch, juniper, spruce, and hornbeam. He was especially enthusiastic about pitch pine. Of interest, pitch pine was described as San-yo-sho (American three-needled pine) in the Kobayashi's 1950 Japanese book, *Bonsai, Miniature Potted*



Figure 19: Top, Fudo, a rare photo from the first large pre-kokufu-ten show. This is possibly this early photo's first appearance in an English language publication.



Figure 20: Middle, Fudo appears in Life Magazine in 1945.



Figure 21: Below, Fudo after being acquired by Murata-san in the late 1960's, and as it appeared on the cover of ABS's journal *Bonsai*, when it was acquired by Brooklyn Botanical Gardens.

Trees; detail about its back-budding properties and small needle size indicated some familiarity by Kobayashi; and Lape is the only person ever described to have collected pitch pine in this era. Did some of Lape's collected pitch pines make it back to Japan? We may never know, but Fred Lape's trees were on display for years at the George Landis Arboretum.

- **Soboku Nishihira** in Hawaii had a prominent collection before the war; this multiplied when almost every other Japanese-Hawaiian gave him their bonsai after Pearl Harbor, fearing such a "Japanese hobby" would mark them as targets of the American soldiers. He passed these on to "papa" Kaneshiro after the war, who became the Father of Tropical Bonsai.
- **"Brother Paul" Bourne**, later to found Bonsai Monks in 1963, one of the first USA bonsai nurseries (and certainly the only one in the USA in a monastery!) visited and studied with several bonsai masters in Japan and China in the 1920's and 30's. He maintained and practiced bonsai but only to a limited extent until Bonsai Monks closed.
- **Chiyoukichi Takahashi** in Berkeley, CA was a northern California teacher. He started bonsai in 1927 and worked briefly with Frank Nagata before the latter moved to L.A. He remained active and influential in the bay area.
- **George Fukuma** immigrated from Japan to Denver in 1919, and became quickly active in Bonsai. He helped form several bonsai clubs there, the first in 1945, one of the earliest bonsai clubs in the USA.
- **Loretta Phillips** in Palm Beach, FL may have started bonsai during this period.
- **Kelley Nishitani** was a nurseryman in Seattle who grew and likely imported bonsai in the prewar era and provided teaching sessions.
- **Bertram Bruenner** bought his first bonsai in 1935 shortly after moving to Seattle. He studied with Kelley Nishitani and George Miller, and eventually was known as the grandfather of bonsai in the Pacific Northwest.
- **Fumiko "Frank" B Nagata** had started a general nursery in LA in 1925, after moving from the Bay area, but was more interested in bonsai. He studied under Sam Doi in

the pre-war decade, and developed a sizable collection. He was able to take a few bonsai to internment at Camp Amache, CO. The majority of his collection he gave away or left to the care of others, most of which were allowed to grow wild and became unsalvageable as bonsai. This was actually the sad fate of most prewar Japanese-American bonsai enthusiasts during WWII. After the war, he became one of the main figures in the west coast bonsai world as a teacher, mentor and expert in the fields of grafting and collecting from the wild. He also introduced and promoted Satzuki azalea as bonsai. He opened the Alpine Baiko Bonsai Nursery in 1952, one of the first purely bonsai nurseries; it was so successful he was able to give up landscaping and support himself just through bonsai. His daughter, Kay, married Khan Komai, both of whom became highly influential bonsai people.

No doubt there were many more individuals who had prominent bonsai roles in the 1900-1940's era.

Yet before 1950, there were no purely bonsai nurseries, no English books (except Nozaki's 1940 English language Japanese book, already out of print at that time and hardly available), no clubs, and no periodicals. It seemed to be just a small number of scattered individuals with bonsai skills. Far outnumbering these individuals were people who looked at bonsai as a novelty, paid high prices for a single imported tree, only to have it die because they had no knowledge about bonsai.

The big changes of the 1950's in America probably started in Los Angeles, with roots in the 1930's. I had mentioned Sam Doi above, who was already an experienced bonsaist at that time. Frank Nagata and Morihei Furuya were interested, but inexperienced. They heard of his bonsai skills, and asked Doi-san to teach them.

So Doi-san taught Nagata-san and Furuya-san, and by 1940 those three plus Naokichi Imanshi, and Mr. Kishi and Mrs. Ai Okumura were all studying together. Unfortunately WWII interceded, and all Japanese Americans were corralled up and placed in remote camps, allowed only the possessions they could carry. Fortunately, Doi-san, Nagata-san and Furuya-san all ended up together in Camp Amache in Colorado. They continued with makeshift local bonsai material but were able to actually put on several bonsai shows within the camp. After the war, they returned to LA, where they met John Naka.

John Naka was born in Colorado to Japanese American parents. When his grandmother in Japan died, his family returned to Japan in support of his grandfather. John was 8, and he spent his teenage years there. He spent time with his grandfather, who introduced him to bonsai. After returning



Figure 22: Domoto Bros Nursery sign, c. 1912, shortly after they removed the words "Ming Tree"

to Colorado at age 21 (shortly after WWII), he met and married Alice Mizunaga; they moved to LA in late 1946, and he started a landscape company. Naka-san's accomplishments in the world of bonsai will be addressed further in a later article; but even in this early period of the late 1940's to 1967, his accomplishments were astounding. In 1952 he collected the two main trees which were to form "Goshen", perhaps the most well-known American bonsai (Figure 23). In 1953 (other sources say 1956), he became the first to collect California juniper (Figures 24 and 25). He began lecturing at the San Gabriel Nursery in east LA (this nursery, established in 1923, became an important gathering point for visiting bonsai masters, and many prominent bonsai people such as Richard Ota worked there); and then extended his lectures across the country, inspiring the formation of other clubs such as the Phoenix Bonsai Society. However one of his most important accomplishments started in the late 1940's, when as noted above, Naka-san joined Frank Nagata, Sam Doi, and Morihei Furuya, and possibly Naokichi Imanshi in a bonsai study group.

In 1950, Naka-san and his group wanted to display their bonsai in a local garden show, but needed to be part of a formal club: Frank Nagata immediately spoke up that they were the "Southern California Bonsai Club". Ai Okimura and Joe Yamishiro joined them to formalize the club (Figure 26); the next day they won a blue ribbon at the show (Figure 27). More joined; in 1952 they changed their name to Southern California Bonsai Society. In 1958 they hoped to become a statewide organization, and changed the name to the California Bonsai Society, with 100 members. Furuya-san was the first president. John Naka became president in 1961,

Figure 23: Above right, Goshen, John Naka's masterpiece named bonsai now residing in the National Arboretum.



Figure 24: Below, John Naka's first collected California Juniper, collected either 1953 or 1956.



a position he held for decades. The club started an annual show in 1958, and by the third show in 1960, themed "Early Spring Bonsai", it was recognized as the largest exhibit in the USA, and received written congratulations from Japanese Prime Minister Kishi. The early year show chairmen included Naka-san ('58), John Catlin ('59), Nagata-san ('60), Earl Donovan ('61), Hunt Lewis ('62), William Hatashita ('63-'65), and George Yamaguchi ('66-67). In 1967, when 60,000 people attended, they began publishing a color journal of each show, along with some instructional articles, called *Bonsai in California*. The club and especially Naka-san arranged visiting bonsai artists from Japan, and tours of Japan for American bonsai artists. The California Bonsai Society remains an active club today.

Several more important clubs developed in the Los Angeles area. One was the Los Angeles Bonsai Club, formed by a breakaway group from the California Bonsai Society. The other is the Santa Anita Bonsai Society, formed by Jim Barrett and Khan Komai; this was the first southern California club whose meetings were conducted only in English, and included important early members Melba Tucker, Robert Harrington, Dixie Shaner and others. Jim Barrett had become interested in bonsai trees in 1954, and within a few years pursued this interest at the San Gabriel Nursery; by 1961 he was teaching a study group at Khan Komai's nursery. He also promoted a Chinese elm discovered by John Catlin the "Catlin Elm" which had very small leaves and has become popular for bonsai. Jim has remained an important bonsai teacher and leader for decades.

Meanwhile up north in the San Francisco Bay area, bonsai activity had also been growing, but at a pace about a decade behind the Los Angeles area. Chiyokichi Takahashi had actually been growing and teaching bonsai since before the war and intensified this after the war. Interest increased, and by the 1950's several clubs formed. Supposedly the first true bonsai nursery was started by Kay Omi. Toshio ("Tosh") Saburo-maru opened Menlo Park Nursery and joined the Peninsula Bonsai Club. In 1957 he started a study group, then in 1959, he started the Kusamura Bonsai Club. Yuji Yoshimura, a master from Japan discussed extensively below, was brought to the USA for an extended visit by Brooklyn Bonsai in 1958, and extended his time in the USA with a teaching and lecturing tour in Northern California (Figure 28). Inspired, Tosh began formal teaching classes. Yoshimura-san returned each of the next several years and gained many regular students. By then there were six bonsai clubs in the Bay area. Yoshimura-san encouraged them to join together with a parent club. Thus, in 1962, the Bay area clubs joined together to form Bonsai Clubs Associated (BCA). The six bonsai clubs included: San Francisco; Marin; Tri County; Kasamura; Sacramento; and East Bay. Horace Hinds was president. A five-page newsletter, "*Bonsai Clubs Association Newsletter*" was started, edited by Robert C. Miller, published and printed by Tosh. However this was not enough, so a magazine of the same name was issued ten times per year. By 1965, it was edited by Horace and Connie Hinds, with abundant contribution from Tosh; circulation was 200. The first photos were added in September 1966, and in December 1966 it was renamed "*Bonsai, Magazine of Bonsai and Japanese Gardens*". Tosh also began traveling around giving teaching demo's, often assisted by Jim Ransohoff. BCA and their magazine were tremendously successful to the point that other clubs from across America began to join. By March, 1968, with member clubs in USA, Canada, South Africa and



New Zealand, BCA officially changed its name to BCI, Bonsai Clubs International; magazine circulation exceeded 1200. So, quite rapidly, this localized union of Bay area clubs grew and evolved into one of our most important and influential international organizations in the field of bonsai.

If the influence of Japanese masters played a modest role in the development of bonsai on the west coast, it played a major and crucial one on the east coast. This was partly due to the predominance of Japanese Americans on the west coast, lacking on the east coast. A huge assist on the east coast bonsai evolution came from the efforts of the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.

The Brooklyn Botanical Garden (BBG) had somewhat of a bonsai reputation, since they had maintained much of the Ernest Coe collection noted above. So after WWII, they received an increasing number of inquiries from around the country about bonsai care, many from servicemen who were assigned to Japan after the war. Dr George Avery (Figure 29) was the BBG director, and he commissioned Kan Yashiroda of Japan to be a guest editor of *Bonsai-Dwarf Potted Trees*. Yashiroda-san invited multiple Japanese bonsai masters and amateurs to write chapters, and the English translated book was published by BBG in 1953. This was the third English language book, following Nozaki: *Dwarf Trees (Bonsai)* in 1940; and Kobayashi / Japan Travel Bureau: *Bonsai-Miniature Potted Trees* in 1950 (we won't count Kiktavi: *How to grow Living Miniature Ming Trees at Home –it's fun-it's profitable.* 1949). The soft-cover BBG book was so popular that the BBG set up bonsai classes featuring Dr Avery and Frank Okamura. Okamura-san was a Japanese nurseryman who had been at the BBG since the late 1940's to care for the bonsai and Japanese garden. These classes were extremely popular, so in both 1955 and 1956 they invited Yashiroda-san to come to the BBG from Japan to teach short term

Figure 25: Left, John Naka carries a freshly collected tree, most likely a California juniper.

Figure 26: Middle, the first members of the California Bonsai Society.

Figure 27: Right, one day after entering their trees, Naka-san accepts a first place award for the newly created Southern California Bonsai Club.

bonsai courses. They also had him edit a second bonsai publication, *Special Techniques* 1956.

Americans also went to Japan. In 1951, Yuji Yoshimura offered open classes in his Kofu-en bonsai nursery in Japan (assisted by Alfred Koehn) (Figure 30). Yoshimura-san was the first master in Japan to do so; five hundred attended, most of them westerners. Kyuzo Murata at Kyuka-en, Omiya was among the highest regarded bonsai masters, and was charged with maintaining the Imperial collection, and the only professional not required to put aside his bonsai during the war. He took on Lynn Perry as an apprentice two days per week for two years beginning in 1960; later he took groups from America for one or two weeks at a time (including the New York group who returned to the USA and immediately started ABS).

But Yuji Yoshimura was the main catalyst for bonsai in America. He was born in Tokyo, son of Toshiji Yoshimura, a leader in Japanese bonsai, and grandson of a samurai. Yuji himself became a prominent bonsai master and was the second-generation master at Kofu-en. After opening his bonsai classes to westerners, he co-authored (with English writer Giovanna Halford) an English language book *The Japanese Art of Miniature Trees and Landscapes*, 1958. This 220 page instructional treatise covered beginning to advanced techniques, and defined the stylistic goals and variations, and defined the Japanese rules; it became the bible for most American bonsai enthusiasts.

Figure 28. Yuji Yoshimura in his first trip to northern California. Yoshimura-san is in the center; Tosh is also pictured, on the end.



Figure 29. Dr George Avery, who spearheaded many important bonsai events while directing the Brooklyn Botanical Garden.



But his contributions from Japan were just the beginning. In 1959 Yoshimura-san accepted an extended fellowship at Brooklyn Botanical Garden (BBG), and gave his first course there on July 12, 1959. While in the USA, he supplemented his trip with the aforementioned travel to the west coast and Hawaii, and spent 6 weeks at Longwood Gardens, Pennsylvania. He then returned the following year to BBG, again also visiting the west coast. His extensive knowledge, tireless work ethic, and kind personality drew people to his classes. But he also had the insight and vision to encourage bonsaists to organize and unite.

So it was no surprise when he established the Yoshimura Bonsai Company, Inc. in Tarrytown NY, confirming a long-term commitment to bonsai in America. His nursery eventually had over 1000 trees, created by him or imported from Japan. He conducted advanced classes there, and at the same time conducted regular courses at New York Botanical Garden, and traveling regularly to the west coast to teach, as well as to Hawaii and the rest of the USA (Figure 31). As an example, in 1963 he traveled by car in May to Cleveland, then Pittsburgh, then to San Francisco, where he stayed from early June through late July. He promoted the development of bonsai clubs throughout America. Of noted, he was also an accomplished classical guitarist.

On February 16, 1963, thirteen of Yoshimura-san's students met at his nursery and decided to organize a club. On February 28, the group, now numbering eighteen, formed the Bonsai Society of Greater New York. Jerald Stowell was elected President; other officers were Walter Hahn, Raymond Porter, Mrs C.V. Smith, Mrs G.P. Case, Lynn Perry, Margaret Priddy, Juanita Schiff, Fred Lowenfels, Paul Fox, and of course Yuji Yoshimura. Edna Kane edited the newsletter. By Issue #2 the newsletter became a magazine, *Bonsai Bulletin*. In mid

1964 Ms Kane was replaced by an editorial staff, consisting of several of the original officers plus Warren Cooper, Michael Gerson, and Marion Gyllenswan. The journal became increasingly sophisticated and professional, printed on shiny paper with photographs, and was issued quarterly.

The Winter 1966/67 Issue of *Bonsai Bulletin*, Volume 4 Number 4 opened with the following editorial comment:

"The last few years have seen a phenomenal growth of interest in bonsai. While some clubs in California have been in operation for a long time, most of our societies have been formed since 1960. The New York Society is a good example. It was founded in 1963 by 18 persons, most of them students of Yuji Yoshimura. In the intervening four years, membership has grown to 700. This number includes 14 corresponding groups, many of which were formed one, two, or three years ago. From Seattle to Phoenix, Boston to Miami, fanciers have joined together to study and share their interest in bonsai.

While there are regional differences in care and style, this interest is what we all have in common. Unlike most plant societies, we have not had a national forum where that interest can be expressed. As the country becomes more fascinated with bonsai, several groups have felt, we should have a country-wide organization. Representatives of clubs in many parts of the nation have discussed the idea, and it is with pleasure that we announce the formation of an American Bonsai Society."

Thus we, the American Bonsai Society (ABS), arose out of the Bonsai Society of Greater New York. There was also a major contribution from the Pennsylvania Bonsai Society. Significant planning was done during a tour to Japan of members of the Bonsai Society of Greater New York, a story of which became the lead article of Volume 1 Number 1 Spring 1967, of the ABS's new journal, simply called "*Bonsai*". The journal was edited by Dorothy Young and



Figure 30: Left, Yuji Yoshimura with assistant and translator Alfred Koehn in c1952 in Japan. The German Mr. Koehn was among the earliest English language bonsai authors.

Figure 31: Right top, Yuji Yoshimura teaches bonsai techniques to westerners at his Kofu-en Bonsai Nursery, spring of 1952.

Figure 32: Right bottom, Gerald Stowell teaches a mix of Bonsai Society of Greater New York and early ABS members. Note everyone still wears formal clothing: women have dresses, men have coats and ties, even to a bonsai event.

Warren Cooper, and was almost identical in appearance to the New York journal, which they had also edited. The first ABS President was Jerald Stowell, who had also been the first president of the New York Society (Figure 32). Constance Derderian was Secretary, and Marion Gyllenswan resigned as president of the New York Society, and was ABS Treasurer. Board members included Lynn Perry Alstadt (now her married name), Ernesta Ballard, Jane Blogg, Paula Busch, Mary Case, John Cook, Warren Cooper, George Hull, Robert Montgomery, Helena Renick, Roger Takamori and Dorothy Young. Significant charter members included Kyozo Murata, Yuji Yoshimura, Chase Rosade, Dr. David Andrews, and Muriel Leeds. This list includes several of the authors of early American bonsai books and journal articles.

Although both the New York and ABS journals stated that the formation of ABS would not affect the New York club, it actually did appear to trigger a crisis. Many of the officers resigned or were replaced, and it was doubtful whether the journal, *Bonsai Bulletin*, would be able to continue. However new editors took over, and the society had 473 members in 1969 and 666 by 1971. By that time Yuji Yoshimura was editor and major contributor; he was followed by Bill Valavanis, when *Bonsai Bulletin* looked like an early version of *Bonsai International* magazine. So the New York society not only recovered, but may have actually had the highest quality bonsai magazine during the 1970's (Figure 34).

But we are jumping ahead of the time period for this article; going back to the 1960's, the proliferation of bonsai

clubs continued, in addition to the clubs mentioned, Cleveland, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, Phoenix, Denver, Michigan, Toronto, Rochester, Umi-seashore NJ, Atlanta and Chicago were among some of the earlier clubs, numbering around 20 in 1965.

In addition, the almost separate art of tropical bonsai was maturing despite limited communication with some of the tropical pacific/Asian countries outside of Japan with bonsai histories. In the USA, Miami was among the first areas in Florida, but multiple clubs eventually lead to the formation of a parent organization Bonsai Societies of Florida in 1970 (formally incorporated in 1973). And in Hawaii beginning around 1950, Haruo "Papa" Kaneshiro, also called the father of tropical bonsai, acquired some of the old bonsai preserved through the war by Soboku Nishihira; Papa Kaneshiro was instrumental in defining the idea that temperate climate bonsai of Japan were not feasible in the tropics; in addition, he promoted a new tropical bonsai styling. Bonsai popularity in Hawaii accelerated in 1964 when Ted Tsukiyama became involved, and the two of them co-founded the Hawaii Bonsai Association in 1972.

So bonsai truly exploded during the 1950's and 1960's. It was truly an exciting time! Learning opportunities and books proliferated. Multiple clubs developed and thrived. But two clubs produced a high-quality journal: The Bonsai Society of Greater New York; and San Francisco Bay area's Bonsai Clubs America. The enthusiasm shown for these two journal-producing clubs shows how starved the snowballing Ameri-

Figure 33: Below left, corkbark JBP purchased by the author in a nursery pot 25 years ago from Jim Barrett, who said he grafted it from Frank Nagata's corkbark 30 years previously. As detailed in this article, the first corkbark and source of most of early California Corkbarks was either Sam Doi or Frank Nagata, so this is likely either a first or second generation graft.

Figure 34.: Below right, Yuji Yoshimura and a younger Bill Valavanis, 1969. Photo with permission of Alan Walker.



can bonsai scene of the 60's was for pictures and information about bonsai. The result was that both clubs had such widespread geographic membership expansion that they were compelled to give rise to parent clubs: ABS, and BCI, respectively. Despite some early discussion of a merger, they retained separate

identities: ABS as an organization for individuals in America; and BCI as an organization for clubs, based in the USA, but with international membership.

We plan an additional article on ABS and American bonsai history in each of the remaining issues of this 50th anniversary year of ABS. We hope you enjoy them.

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